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ABSTRACT

Since learning is, by nature, an intimate process, students can far too often come to view teachers as surrogate counselors. This can represent a problem at two-year colleges where teachers often have little training in counseling and students admitted under open admissions policies often have a sense of personal failure. An informal survey of faculty at North Central Michigan College and on electronic listserv programs on the Internet revealed that, of 40 respondents, only 3 had not been approached by students for counseling related to a non-academic problem. Further, of the 37 who had been approached, over half had little or no training in the area of counseling. One useful technique for dealing with students seeking counseling is Glasser's Reality Therapy. This technique is based on the principle that actions taken in life are done to fulfill five needs (i.e., basic survival, power, belonging, fun, and freedom) and is designed to help individuals understand that they must make their own decisions. To implement this technique, instructors must first and foremost listen to students' stories, since students may only be looking for someone to listen to them. After listening, teachers should ask questions to solicit students' own opinions regarding what they wish to do and how they want to achieve it. Contains 10 references. (BCY)

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BALANCING ACADEMICS AND STUDENTS' PERSONAL CRISES:

TEACHERS AS COUNSELORS

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Virginia Skinner-Linnenberg is the Chair of the Communications/ Humanities Department at North Central Michigan College in Petoskey, Michigan. She also serves as a professor of English. She holds a PhD in Rhetoric / Writing and Literature from Bowling Green State University in Ohio. In addition, she holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Louisville, Kentucky, and a BA in Psychology from Bowling Green State University. Virginia's talents in teaching have been recognized by students and faculty alike. She was named Teacher of the Year for 1994-95 and Employee of the Year also for 1994-95. Her interest in aiding students with their personal crises comes in part from students looking to her as a role model and thus asking for her advice.

Daniel M. Linnenberg is a Licensed Professional Counselor and a National Certified Counselor. He is the Special Populations Coordinator at North Central Michigan College and serves as an adjunct professor for sociology. He also is an ordained Episcopal priest assigned to the Episcopal Church of the Nativity in Boyne City, Michigan. In addition, he has had experience as a clergy counselor at a drug rehabilitation facility and has experience running a private counseling practice. Daniel holds an M.Div. from Nashotah House Theological Seminary, an MA in Education (Community Agency Counseling) from Western Kentucky University and a BA in Deviant Anthropology from Bowling Green State University. Daniel has a natural interest in helping teachers cope with students' personal crises since a portion of his job entails just that--aiding students in finding answers to their problems.

Balancing Academics and Students' Personal Crises: Teachers as Counselors

Virginia Skinner-Linnenberg, PhD
Daniel M. Linnenberg, LPC, NCC

Learning is an intimate process which many instructors try to encourage by making students feel as comfortable as possible. Consequently, to students, that intimacy seems to reach to even deeper realms. Thus, far too often, students view teachers as surrogate counselors/confessors. At the two-year college where the majority of students are nontraditional older adults, the experiences shared with teachers are many times heart-wrenching, heroic, tormenting, even life-threatening. We hear about the divorce that has taken a nasty turn; we hear about the domestic abuse from which a student is fleeing; we hear about the suicide of a relative. And the list goes on.

During a recent conversation with a colleague who had just learned that one of his students was in jail, we commiserated that our role as teachers had certainly evolved into something other than for what we had been academically trained. He stated, "We might as well give up the pretense of being teachers and just call ourselves counselors."

At the two-year college, particularly those with open admission, students often enter the classroom with a deep sense of personal failure and they look to teachers for help, not only academically, but also personally. Therefore, how do teachers transcend the academic boundaries and reach out to these students, especially when many of them have not had the same experiences as the students? Relationships between the teacher and the student have their share of research (Tobin, Brooke, Murray, Onore). However, do teachers endanger those relationships if they refuse to play the role of counselor? What can department chairs do to help their teachers overcome such obstacles and take the risk involved with aiding their students?

First, to get an idea of how pervasive this problem is, we surveyed faculty members at our institution and through some listserv bulletin boards on the Internet. Out of the 40 responses we received, only three stated that they had not had students come to them for advice/ counseling about a nonacademic problem. (We also might mention here that all three of those respondents were male. We speculate that female teachers may be perceived as more approachable by both female and male students.) Of those 37 teachers who had been asked for assistance, over half of them had little or no training in the area of counseling. Those who did have training taught mainly in nursing and sociology.

Problems presented by students to their instructors varied widely: abuse, suicide, drug addiction, financial difficulties, failures in relationships, job search, racial issues, buying/selling homes, alcohol addiction, child/family problems. The list is overwhelming. And yet, the majority of teachers said they did not feel competent in giving advice to these students. One teacher's response was that he was "very squeamish" about offering advice. Other answers included:

- I often felt I could listen, but rarely felt I should offer anything other than clarification of choices.
- It was more a matter of listening and trying to figure out to whom I should refer this person.
- I try to link up with [the school counselor] or the Women's Resource Center rather than give advice. I do a lot of listening.

The majority of respondents stated that they referred students to the college counselors or to professionals because they, as teachers, were not prepared to handle any personal problems. Some professors felt that counseling was not their responsibility and discouraged students from seeking them out with their personal problems. One professor saw any attempt to gain counseling knowledge as detrimental to his own academic field:

> As a faculty member, I believe that distinguishing advising from counseling is the extent of my counseling responsibilities. To gain expertise in counseling is to lose it in another area such as my curriculum. "Jack of all trades, master of none."

In a study done in the Massachusetts Community College System, Maxine Elmont found similar outcomes to our survey. Some 173 educators who worked with nontraditional students and high-risk students in developmental education stated that they spend the majority of their time working directly with students. Therefore, they expressed a need for more training in the counseling skills area. Likewise, in her article "Martha Meets Her Mentor: The Power of Teaching Relationships," Laurent Daloz writes that much teaching occurs in day-to-day conversations with students. "Mentors teach their students as much by how they relate to them as by what they tell them" (5). This article does not directly address the personal problems of students; however, college teachers need to know what to do when faced with such a situation. If college teachers do not have the skills to aid students in a crisis, the fragile student-teacher relationship we work so hard to build may be damaged.

"What Should I Do?"

Teachers at the K-12 levels are normally given some instruction in counseling, conflict resolution, or classroom management which entails methods of dealing with student crisis situations. On the other hand, the college instructor, unlike

the K-12 teacher, generally comes to the teaching environment straight from the academic/research area without having any background in Educational Management. Nevertheless, there are techniques teachers can utilized in aiding adult students.

An excellent method of dealing with students in a "counseling" situation is to utilize Reality Therapy as developed by Dr. William Glasser. The most basic principle of Reality Therapy is the belief that the actions we take in life are done to fulfill our five needs: our basic survival need, and our higher needs of power, belonging, fun, and freedom.

The reality of life is that the only thing we have any control over is ourselves and what we do, our own behavior. We have very minimal control over our own physiology, a little more over our emotions, some control over our own thinking (but not total); the only aspect of what we do have control over is our actions.

With Reality Therapy, the teacher helps the student to see that s/he must make the decision of what to do. Advice is not given.

To implement this therapy, first and foremost, the instructor is called upon to listen to the story. Students who approach teachers usually only want to tell the story of what's happening in their lives. All one may have to do is ask the simple question "What's going on?" Students are often only looking for someone to listen to them. They may be reluctant to talk to the college's counselors because they do not perceive their problems to be that drastic. Or, they may simply not know the counselors. Of course, instructors are not counselors; yet they are seen as individuals who, through their chosen career, have opened themselves as people who care. In many cases, students initially want to explain their absence from class or a reason why their papers will be late. They are not looking for advice and it is not the role of the teacher to give it. For that matter it is not the role of the counselor to give advice, only to assist the student in the clarification of the event, clarification of wants, the evaluation of actions taken, or to be taken, and assist the student to make up his/her own plan of action. Likewise, the role of the teacher as counselor is to listen to the story--if given--and then guide the student to the appropriate plan (which may be to seek another resource such as the college's counseling center).

The responsibility for the mental health of the individual is his/her own. In other words, the only person who can take care of a person is that person. In dealing with students in crisis situations it is important not to take away their responsibility for themselves.

When a student approaches an instructor, that instructor is seen as an individual who has made something of her/himself, a survivor in this world of life and as a person who cares about others, who cares enough to teach. In

many cases, what the student is looking for is a friend--a friend who has survived. Therefore, the teacher should act like a friend.

After listening to the story, there are four questions that the teacher will want to ask, in order to direct the conversation:

- What do you want?
- What are you doing (about it)?
- Is your behavior helping or hurting you?
- What is your plan?

If the student has a plan and has tried implementing it, but without success, the teacher will want to aid the student in coming up with a new plan, one that the student is willing to put into action.

The most basic of concepts within the theory of Reality Therapy is that how the world is and how we think it should be sometimes comes into conflict. When this happens we tend to act in ways which will meet our own needs. Students need to understand this and apply it to their own lives.

After such a session, the instructor should always follow up. S/he should check to see how the student is doing. This can be done quickly and quietly sometimes as they pass in the hallway.

It is important for teachers to remember that they are not being paid to solve students' personal problems; for that matter nobody on campus is being paid to solve the students' personal problems. The difference is that there are several people being paid to assist the students in dealing with their own problems. Yet, there are certain things a teacher can do to better develop the relationship between student and teacher and thus the counseling environment. Reality Therapy expert Robert Wubbolding recommends that one always be courteous, determined, enthusiastic, firm and genuine. Moreover, the teachers should be themselves, showing empathy and even sharing similar aspects of their lives if appropriate. However, instructors should also defiantly avoid arguing with the student, giving advice, criticizing or demeaning the student, avoid instilling fear, encouraging excuses, and <u>never give up on them</u>.

The principles of Reality Therapy allow the teacher to be a caring person but leaves the onus of responsibility on the student to take care of the problem. The teacher becomes a sounding board, one who listens to what the student has to say--listens to the story without negating the student's responsibility to take care of his/her own problem. With this approach, the teacher is not doing psychotherapy, but is a friend by lending an ear to the problem and aiding the student to see that s/he needs her/his <u>own</u> plan to resolve the issue.

7

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